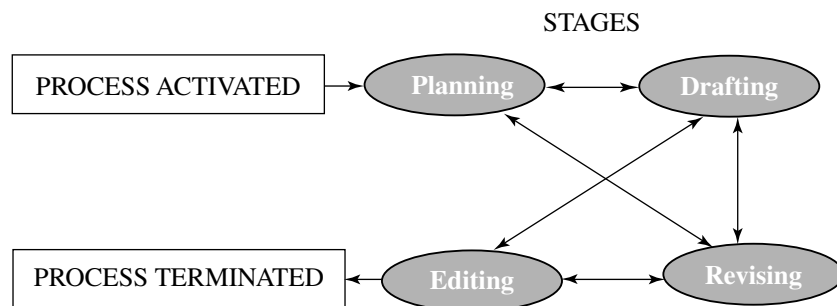# The Writing Process and Process Writing

*Anthony Seow*

### INTRODUCTION

The writing process as a private activity may be broadly seen as comprising four main stages: planning, drafting, revising and editing. As depicted in Figure 1, the stages are neither sequential nor orderly. In fact, as research has suggested, 'many good writers employ a recursive, non-linear approach – writing of a draft may be interrupted by more planning, and revision may lead to reformulation, with a great deal of recycling to earlier stages' (Krashen, 1984, p. 17).

### PROCESS WRITING

The term *process writing* has been bandied about for quite a while in ESL classrooms. It is no more than a *writing process approach* to teaching writing. The idea behind it is not really to dissociate writing entirely from the written product and to merely lead students



**Figure 1**    The Writing Process

through the various stages of the writing process but 'to construct process-oriented writing instruction that will affect performance' (Freedman, Dyson, Flower, & Chafe, 1987, p. 13). To have an effective performance-oriented teaching programme would mean that we need to systematically teach students problem-solving skills connected with the writing process that will enable them to realise specific goals at each stage of the composing process. Thus, process writing in the classroom may be construed as a programme of instruction which provides students with a series of planned learning experiences to help them understand the nature of writing at every point.

Process writing as a classroom activity incorporates the four basic writing stages – planning, drafting (writing), revising (redrafting) and editing – and three other stages externally imposed on students by the teacher, namely, responding (sharing), evaluating and post-writing. Process writing in the classroom is highly structured as it necessitates the *orderly* teaching of process skills, and thus it may not, at least initially, give way to a free variation of writing stages cited earlier. Teachers often plan appropriate classroom activities that support the learning of specific writing skills at every stage. The planned learning experiences for students may be described as follows.

## PLANNING (PRE-WRITING)

Pre-writing is any activity in the classroom that encourages students to write. It stimulates thoughts for getting started. In fact, it moves students away from having to face a blank page toward generating tentative ideas and gathering information for writing. The following activities provide the learning experiences for students at this stage:

### GROUP BRAINSTORMING

Group members spew out ideas about the topic. Spontaneity is important here. There are no right or wrong answers. Students may cover familiar ground first and then move off to more abstract or wild territories.

### CLUSTERING

Students form words related to a stimulus supplied by the teacher. The words are circled and then linked by lines to show discernible clusters. Clustering is a simple yet powerful strategy: "Its visual character seems to stimulate the flow of association . . . and is particularly good for students who know what they want to say but just can't say it" (Proett & Gill, 1986, p. 6).

### RAPID FREE WRITING

Within a limited time of 1 or 2 minutes, individual students freely and quickly write down single words and phrases about a topic. The time limit keeps the writers' minds ticking and thinking fast. Rapid free writing is done when group brainstorming is not possible or because the personal nature of a certain topic requires a different strategy.

### *WH*-QUESTIONS

Students generate *who*, *why*, *what*, *where*, *when* and *how* questions about a topic. More such questions can be asked of answers to the first string of *wh*-questions, and so on. This can go on indefinitely.

In addition, ideas for writing can be elicited from multimedia sources (e.g., printed material, videos, films), as well as from direct interviews, talks, surveys, and questionnaires.

Students will be more motivated to write when given a variety of means for gathering information during pre-writing.

## DRAFTING

Once sufficient ideas are gathered at the planning stage, the first attempt at writing – that is, drafting – may proceed quickly. At the drafting stage, the writers are focused on the fluency of writing and are not preoccupied with grammatical accuracy or the neatness of the draft. One dimension of good writing is the writer's ability to visualise an audience. Although writing in the classroom is almost always for the teacher, the students may also be encouraged to write for different audiences, among whom are peers, other classmates, pen-friends and family members. A conscious sense of audience can dictate a certain style to be used. Students should also have in mind a central idea that they want to communicate to the audience in order to give direction to their writing.

Depending on the genre of writing (narrative, expository or argumentative), an introduction to the subject of writing may be a *startling statement* to arrest the reader's attention, a *short summary* of the rest of the writing, an *apt quotation*, a *provocative question*, a *general statement*, an *analogy*, a *statement of purpose*, and so on. Such a strategy may provide the lead at the drafting stage. Once a start is made, the writing task is simplified 'as the writers let go and disappear into the act of writing' (D'Aoust, 1986, p. 7).

## RESPONDING

Responding to student writing by the teacher (or by peers) has a central role to play in the successful implementation of process writing. Responding intervenes between drafting and revising. It is the teacher's *quick initial reaction* to students' drafts. Response can be oral or in writing, after the students have produced the first draft and just before they proceed to revise. The failure of many writing programmes in schools today may be ascribed to the fact that responding is done in the final stage when the teacher simultaneously *responds* and *evaluates*, and even *edits* students' finished texts, thus giving students the impression that nothing more needs to be done.

*Text-specific* responses in the form of helpful suggestions and questions rather than 'rubber-stamped' comments (such as 'organisation is OK', 'ideas are too vague' etc.) by the teacher will help students rediscover meanings and facilitate the revision of initial drafts. Such responses may be provided in the margin, between sentence lines or at the end of students' texts. Peer responding can be effectively carried out by having students respond to each other's texts in small groups or in pairs, with the aid of the checklist in Table 1 (adapted from Reinking & Hart, 1991).

## REVISING

When students revise, they review their texts on the basis of the feedback given in the responding stage. They reexamine what was written to see how effectively they have communicated their meanings to the reader. Revising is not merely checking for language errors (i.e., editing). It is done to improve global content and the organisation of ideas so that the writer's intent is made clearer to the reader.

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### TABLE 1.    PEER RESPONDING CHECKLIST

When responding to your peer's draft, ask yourself these questions:

What is the greatest strength of this composition?

What is its greatest weakness?

What is the central idea of this composition?

Which are the ideas which need more elaboration?

Where should more details or examples be added? Why?

What are some of the questions that the writer has not answered?

At which point does this composition fail to hold the reader's interest? Why?

Where is the organisation confusing?

Where is the writing unclear or vague?

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To ensure that rewriting does not mean recopying, Beck (1986, p. 149) suggests that the teacher collect and keep the students' drafts and ask them for rewrites. 'When the students are forced to act without their original drafts, they become more familiar with their purposes and their unique messages. ... The writers move more ably within their topics, and their writing develops tones of confidence and authority'.

Another activity for revising may have the students working in pairs to read aloud each other's drafts before they revise. As students listen intently to their own writing, they are brought to a more conscious level of rethinking and reseeing what they have written. Meanings which are vague become more apparent when the writers actually hear their own texts read out to them. Revision often becomes more voluntary and motivating. An alternative to this would be to have individual students read their own texts into a tape recorder and take a dictation of their own writing later. Students can replay the tape as often as necessary and activate the pause button at points where they need to make productive revision of their texts.

## EDITING

At this stage, students are engaged in tidying up their texts as they prepare the final draft for evaluation by the teacher. They edit their own or their peer's work for grammar, spelling, punctuation, diction, sentence structure and accuracy of supportive textual material such as quotations, examples and the like. Formal editing is deferred till this phase in order that its application not disrupt the free flow of ideas during the drafting and revising stages.

A simple checklist might be issued to students to alert them to some of the common surface errors found in students' writing. For instance:

- Have you used your verbs in the correct tense?
- Are the verb forms correct?
- Have you checked for subject–verb agreement?
- Have you used the correct prepositions?
- Have you left out the articles where they are required?
- Have you used all your pronouns correctly?

- Is your choice of adjectives and adverbs appropriate?
- Have you written in complete sentences?

The students are, however, not always expected to know where and how to correct every error, but editing to the best of their ability should be done as a matter of course, prior to submitting their work for evaluation each time. Editing within process writing is meaningful because students can see the connection between such an exercise and their own writing in that correction is not done for its own sake but as part of the process of making communication as clear and unambiguous as possible to an audience.

## EVALUATING

Very often, teachers pleading lack of time have compressed responding, editing and evaluating all into one. This would, in effect, deprive students of that vital link between drafting and revision – that is, responding – which often makes a big difference to the kind of writing that will eventually be produced.

In evaluating student writing, the scoring may be analytical (i.e., based on specific aspects of writing ability) or holistic (i.e., based on a global interpretation of the effectiveness of that piece of writing). In order to be effective, the criteria for evaluation should be made known to students in advance. They should include overall interpretation of the task, sense of audience, relevance, development and organisation of ideas, format or layout, grammar and structure, spelling and punctuation, range and appropriateness of vocabulary, and clarity of communication. Depending on the purpose of evaluation, a numerical score or grade may be assigned.

Students may be encouraged to evaluate their own and each other's texts once they have been properly taught how to do it. In this way, they are made to be more responsible for their own writing.

## POST-WRITING

Post-writing constitutes any classroom activity that the teacher and students can do with the completed pieces of writing. This includes publishing, sharing, reading aloud, transforming texts for stage performances, or merely displaying texts on notice-boards. The post-writing stage is a platform for recognising students' work as important and worthwhile. It may be used as a motivation for writing as well as to hedge against students finding excuses for not writing. Students must be made to feel that they are writing for a very real purpose.

## IMPLEMENTING PROCESS WRITING

Here are some pointers which teachers may like to take note of when implementing process writing:

### TEACHER MODELLING

Teachers should model the writing process at every stage and teach specific writing strategies to students through meaningful classroom activities.

### RELATING PROCESS TO PRODUCT

A first draft looks quite unlike another draft that has gone through several revisions. It is vital that as students go through the various stages of writing, they understand what kind of product is expected at each stage. Thus students need to be guided to set and achieve specific writing goals at every stage.

### WORKING WITHIN INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

It is possible to teach some process skills appropriate to a writing stage, be it planning, drafting, responding, revising or editing within a regular two-period composition lesson. The teaching of the same process skill could be repeated in subsequent composition lessons. Process skills can be systematically taught each time until the entire series of such skills is developed over a period of time.

### CATERING TO DIVERSE STUDENT NEEDS

The teacher should implement a flexible programme to cater to different student needs. The teacher will need to know what the individual student knows and work from there. The teacher may also decide to have students enter into different writing groups as planners, drafters, responders, revisers or editors during a writing session. A student may be with the planners for one writing task, but move to be with the editors later for the same or another task, according to his or her need or developmental stage in writing.

### EXPLOITING THE USE OF COMPUTERS IN PROCESS WRITING

Many word-processing programmes are user-friendly enough for students to handle. Their direct application to process writing, especially for the purposes of drafting, revising and editing, is rewarding for both the teacher and the students. The teacher can teach responding or editing skills via the computer hooked on to an overhead projector. The students can freely make any number of changes to their texts by deleting words or moving them around without having to retype large chunks of text all over again. Any work done can be saved on the computer for revision later.

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